

U N I K A S S E L
V E R S I T Ä T

Master Thesis Exposé

**“Survival and success: the manager’s
role in achieving organizational resilience”**

Submitted by
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Abstract

The resilience capacity within an organization plays a fundamental role in adapting and surviving; resilience is the capacity to adapt, cope and anticipate (if possible) an unexpected event. There are many definitions (Hillmann & Guenther, 2020) that describe what resilience is under different points of view (organizational, personal, situational), but in the literature the focus tends to forget to look at how the environment is perceived within the chain especially at low levels like the managers.

The global crisis caused by Covid-19 has led large and small companies to necessarily face changes in a short period of time. The ability to adapt can in some cases mean the difference between success and mediocrity, but, in a situation like this one, it can represent the difference between survival and failure.

The purpose of this study is to look at the situation from the point of view of the managers who are those who are in the front row and have the first contact with the real "problem" and sometimes find themselves in the situation of having to deal with it.

The study will be developed through qualitative face-to-face interviews with the managers of some retail stores in a shopping center located in the north of Italy and will indagate how they coped with the pandemic, their reaction to it and how their actions influence the organizational resilience.

Keywords

- Organizational resilience
- Perception
- Managers
- Behavior

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1. Introduction

Commercial competition increases year by year and the product brand is no longer enough to differentiate one store from another, “..retailers invest millions to create effective retail atmospheres that can engage customers at all stages in their shopping journey..” (Roggeveen et al., 2020, pp. 8).

We can say that the store environment affects a shopper’s emotions and mood, which then influence the shopper’s behavior (Ebster & Garaus, 2011) this is also because consumers no longer seek only for a product, but they search for an experience.

Whether it is to stand out from another boutique, to increase sales or to encourage customers to stay longer in the shop, there are many strategies; often used are the techniques aimed at stimulating the five senses (Elliot & Maier, 2014; Grohmann et al., 2006; Morrison et al., 2011; Davies et al., 2003; Soars, 2009).

With the current pandemic many of these techniques have lost their effectiveness and shops have had to cope with the situation; the managers found themselves having to comply with very strict security measures, sometimes unable to show or let the product be tested and this certainly affected sales.

In an unstable situation such as the current one, it is therefore important for companies to be able to develop a resilience capacity that makes it possible for companies to cope with unexpected events (Boin & Eeten, 2013; Duchek, 2020).

Resilience capacity refers to the actual ability of the elements of the chain to prepare, predict and react to a crisis (Hillmann & Guenther, 2020).

Many times “we discuss the nature of change that is important for the resilience discussion, it is also important to discuss how the environment is perceived by the people in an organization, especially managers.” (Hillmann & Guenther, 2020, pp. 27). Managers find themselves in the first row and usually are the firsts to see the problem coming, the firsts that have to deal with it even before the company realizes it and the firsts to anticipate it (if possible).

There are many models that analyze organizational resilience (Limnios et al., 2014; Nilakant et al., 2014), but always from the same organizational point of view. In short, constructs on theory are well researched but the situational role and perception of manager is still unclear and unexplored.

The aim of this study is to provide a new bottom-up approach and to see the effects of organizational resilience and its current application at manager level in a practical way.

We will start by giving a theoretical overview to define the basis of the study and then continue with the development of the hypotheses and the use of the theoretical framework, the methodology (qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews) and the analysis of the results.

2. Theoretical Framing

The concept of resilience has been extensively studied over the years (Boin et al., 2013; Foster, 1993) from different points of view, however, even today, the literature and experts have not been able to agree on a single definition of resilience (Hillmann & Guenther, 2020) and also from a practical perspective different models were created to measure organizational resilience (Limnios et al., 2014; Nilakant et al., 2014).

From now on we will consider resilience as the capacity, within an organization, in adapting and surviving; resilience is therefore the capacity to adapt, cope and anticipate (if possible) an unexpected event (Hillmann & Guenther, 2020).

Many theoretical points of view that have been adopted during the years (Hillmann & Guenther, 2020), whether from an organization point of view (Hall et al., 2011), from an individual point of view (Coutu, 2002; Horne, 1997) or from the unexpected event point of view (Linnenluecke et al., 2017); we can affirm that the subject has been extensively studied in a deductive way.

Organizational resilience, often, is mostly outcome focused in literature and it is seen as the way in which companies deal with the unexpected event in order to achieve an efficient outcome and therefore resilience (Sutcliffe & Vogus 2003).

The approach of this research, contrary to the literature, will be a bottom up approach that starts from the individual to go back to the general context of the organization.

In resilience discussion the environments that is perceived by individuals plays a role, in particular the one perceived by managers (McCann et al., 2009); they usually find themselves in situations where they have to take big risks because of the uncertainty of the environment and try to anticipate unexpected events by preparing preventive actions (Smart & Vertinsky, 1984). Resilience may be found therefore at the organizational level but not necessarily at the individual level and vice versa.

It is, therefore, interesting to investigate how the actions of managers who are at the end of the chain affect the construction in and of itself of resilience within a company.

So, the resilience capacity of a company can increase and decrease influenced by many factors (Barasa et al., 2018), but at a practical managerial level how is this concept perceived by managers and how is the concept applied?

The situational role of managers is unclear; the training they receive should surely influence the way they face the unexpected event and the way they overcome this last, but then which is the influence on the company going backwards?

Knowledge on the topic is very restricted and the gaps pops out quite in an obvious way.

The level of knowledge of managers affects their behavior and their ability to fill the role of crisis manager when the crisis appears in a practical way.

Strategies such as Sensory Marketing (Krishna, 2011) or the use of the Retail Strategy Model (Turley et al., 2002) are part of everyday life inside a store and, in the case of the pandemic, some of these strategies have lost their effectiveness and managers have found themselves having to face this problem. Being familiar with strategies and being able to change them could build and contribute to the entire organization becoming more resilient.

Another important point is the retail strategy that is the strategy put in place in order to achieve company's goals. The retail manger is close to the consumer and therefore his position allow to gather information on behavior of consumers and therefore develop market-oriented strategies (Reynolds, 2004).

According to the theory of sensory marketing when the five senses of man are involved it is possible to influence the behavior of the subject in order to obtain a certain result.

The most easily stimulated senses are sight, smell and hearing which, if stimulated in the correct way, can change a person's mood and even push him to stay longer in the shop.

Haptics is the first sense to appear in childhood and the last to disappear, it is very effective for certain types of products and for sale in the store while it is difficult to reach online.

The most complicated sense to stimulate is undoubtedly the taste as activating it without an actual product tester is almost unattainable.

What the senses really do, however, is to activate the perception of customers in a specific way and subsequently reflect on their emotions; this subsequently has an influence on behavior, memory and attitude.

On the other hand, Retail Strategy model (Turley et al., 2002) is usually used in order to understand the “strategic issues associated with retail atmospheric design”. This model explains that the store design has effective and specific turnouts on the shopping behavior of consumers and that the retail strategy of a store should be carefully built upon these variables in order to optimize profits. “Consumers seek excitement and arousal from the environment of a retail store and spend more money in these types of environments” (Turley & Chebat, 2002) therefore retail manager to optimize the environment should take into account the fact of providing the consumer not only with a product,

but with an unforgettable experience so that to impact consumer behavior, memory and image of the store.

Being able to adapt these strategies during a period of crisis influences the organizational resilience, the degree of adaptability and flexibility of managers influences the way and the decision they are able to make when the unexpected event arises.

To conclude, we can say that also the type of unexpected event plays a role in the notion of resilience because to talk about resilience it is important firstly to understand to what a company or an organization need to be resilient to (Martin-Breen & Anderies 2011): to a disruptive event, to an unexpected circumstance, to incidents or to general changes. Of course, the type of company and the type of industry do influence how resilience is built within the organization (Horne, 1997) and each one of them needs to find its own path to build effectively resilience.

It is clear now why it is impossible to look at all these factors singularly, they create a complex process that in the end results in the same output: resilience capacity and capability. Each individual does influence the rest of the chain and in this thesis we will outline how from bottom up point of view the managers of retail stores are linked with the achievement of organizational resilience focusing on the actual situation caused by Covid-19.

The study aims to investigate the managerial perception and influence on resilience by trying to investigate their behavior with regard to the pandemic caused by Covid-19 and the differences in actions that may be taken based on the business and the size of the organization.

3. Propositions

The aim of the research is to go deep into the perception of managers to understand what role they play in the development of resilience in a company (Hillmann & Guenther, 2020). The idea is to understand how managers, in the front line, react to an unexpected event by following specific directives or acting with free will.

P1. Managers understanding the strategy contribute to improve resilience

It is stated that individuals influence the resilience of the company themselves; the way they act, think, behave and perceive the company states the level of resilience that the organization can achieve (Coutu, 2002; Horne, 1997; Horne and Orr, 1998; Mallak, 1998; Shin *et al.*, 2012).

People working in the company usually, when entering, stipulate a “psychological contract” (McCoy & Elwood, 2009); that is strictly related to the organizational resilience because if workers feel treated in the right way, have a sufficient training to work efficiently and understand the main goals then the performance will benefit from it and therefore also the organizational resilience and the response to unexpected events will increase.

P2. Managers understanding the day to day business and being able to adapt contribute to more resilience

Managers are more efficient and can apply the strategy better when they are supported by the organizational culture (Alamsjah, 2011). When managers understand and share the strategy and recognize how the organization does things the execution results in a better performance with a higher outcome. Top management directions are still important, but the communication and the knowledge of the day to day strategy helps managers to accomplish their tasks better. Feedback on performance influence all the following actions and outcomes.

P3. Managers being able to anticipate the scale of problem improve resilience

The type of unexpected event plays a role in the notion of resilience because to talk about resilience it is important firstly to understand to what a company or an organization need to be resilient to (Breen & Anderies, 2011): a disruptive event, an unexpected circumstance, incidents or general changes.

The situational awareness of the managers helps them anticipate a possible obstacle and therefore get ready and act proactively faced with the challenge.

Hence, the ability of managers to prepare and act efficiently and effectively increases the resilience of the organization.

P4. The degree of flexibility of managers influences resilience capacity and capability

Inside a company “having a capability means having both ability and capacity, and it is only when a capacity for resilience is transformed into action in an organization that resilience becomes an organizational capability” (Richtnér and Löfsten 2014, p. 138).

The identification of the “problem” tends to appear before receiving official directives on how to deal with the crisis (e.g. store environment techniques no longer effective due to Covid-19 restrictions); managers therefore find themselves having to cope with these situations and take decisions in a very short time period. Resilience of the organization is therefore influenced by the behavior and awareness of the managers of the unexpected event and the ability to act.

The managers' ability to act quickly in the face of the pandemic helps the company to act efficiently while minimizing losses.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design / Methodological approach

The thesis will be developed following a qualitative approach which seems the most appropriate method to develop insights from the managerial point of view and different perspectives (Flick, 2018); the qualitative method allows to go into detail and obtain opinions and emotions that would not be possible to identify with a quantitative approach.

Through the interpretation of the results it is possible to obtain multiple viewpoints and positions on the same topic and therefore investigate all its facets.

The research will be developed in the retail context focusing on the general environment of the shop starting analyzing the strategies that were adopted before the pandemic and the changes that managers had to face due to Covid-19; the main goal is to identify the role that managers played into the organizational resilience and how the situation was perceived and handled at their level.

Semi-structured interviews will be carried out face-to-face with retail managers going deep into their perception and knowledge about the topic.

4.2 Research context and sample description

It is important to describe the motivations behind the definition of the sample and the context of the study in order to motivate the choices that have been made and how the study will be carried out.

The setting will be inside a shopping mall situated in Italy; retail stores were among the categories most affected by the Covid-19 event and therefore they are the ideal place to see how managers reacted to the situation and how they adapted the strategies within the store.

Furthermore, inside the shopping center it is possible to observe whether there is a substantial difference in the behavior of the managers of large chains compared to the managers of small independent stores. This sample, moreover, allows a better comparison because the environment in which the stores are located is all in the same geographical location.

The focus falls on the managers of the retail stores because they are those who are at the forefront and have the opportunity to see the effects of the strategies implemented within the store day after day. They represent those who, in case of an unexpected event, are able to immediately identify the problem and see the practical consequences on the field.

Farther, also the General Manager of the whole shopping center will be interviewed as an expert in order to get an additional point of view.

The mall, the store inside and the managers are, once again, the ideal sample because they represent the perfect situation to analyze; all the stores inside the mall were affected by the pandemic and the different managers had to face all similar issues. Also, managers and the director expressed the availability to participate to the study and therefore give the opportunity to discover insights and do a comparison between shops that are situated in the same reality. Stores managers will be selected from various industry in order to have a broader point also of view of how different industries affected the way managers reacted.

4.3 Data and data collection procedures

Data collection will follow a qualitative method: the Director and Managers will be interviewed face to face following a semi-structured method after which the interviews will be recorded and transcribed. If, due to Covid-19, this path will not be carried out the interviews will be transported online through a Skype or Zoom call.

Usually, when there is only once chance to interview the subjects the semi-structured interview is the best methodology since it supplies a set of instructions that can be followed (Bernard, 1988).

The preparation of the questions helps to understand deeply the concepts and be ready; it also allows the interviewer to be able to point out, throughout the interview, new path to follow in order to get more insights and not forget the topics that have to be covered.

The main goal is to make the interviewee feel free to communicate and manifest its thoughts freely with no boundaries.

The start of data collection is scheduled for October 5, 2020 with the interview with the Director of the shopping mall, then the rest of the interviews with the Managers will be carried out starting from the last week of October.

To provide more flexibility and choice, the online software "Calendly" will be used, which will allow Managers to book themselves the space they want most, among those proposed, to carry out the interview.

In case of impossibility of a face-to-face interview due to commitments or due to the current situation of Covid-19, the interviews will be carried out online through the Zoom platform.

The estimated date for the completion of the interviews is towards the third week of November in order to start immediately with the analysis of the results.

The interviews will be recorded using Audacity and Windows Speech Recording software, with the consent of the participants, for the purpose of the subsequent transcription for data analysis.

4.4 Data analysis procedures

To develop the analysis of the results the Gioia Methodology will be followed, it is considered to be the best option to understand the perception of managers because “..the heart of these studies is the semi-structured interview—to obtain both retrospective and real-time accounts by those people experiencing the phenomenon of theoretical interest.” (Gioia et al., 2013, pp. 19).

Diplomacy, discretion and transparency will be key guidelines throughout the process and anonymity will be granted to all the participant of the study.

5. Expected Contributions

The research carried out contributes to the academic field by adding knowledge to the literature from a theoretical point of view.

The study provides a new point of view not yet analyzed and looks at the typical structure (from top to bottom) in the opposite way by analyzing the influence that the actions and decisions of managers in retail stores have on the resilience of the entire organization .

From a practical point of view, the results obtained will be useful to companies in order to improve resilience and see the actual consequences, within their own company, even of small decisions taken at the lowest level. The capacity for resilience in a crisis situation such as the current one represents a significant strategic advantage; the study will therefore also help to understand how to increase this organizational resilience based on the perception that managers have of the unexpected events.

The relevance for the society is still open waiting for the results of the study, but at the moment we can say that the contribution is due to the analysis of the current situation and consequences of Covid-19.

6. Thesis Chapter overview

In the development of this study we will start by giving a definition of resilience by explaining, from a theoretical point of view, the approaches that have been developed so far in the literature.

We will continue with the exposition of the propositions by discussing the focus and general direction of the study linked by the support of the literature.

The next step will involve explaining the methodology with which the research will be conducted and the related reasons for the selection of this typology.

To conclude we will state the contributions and limitations of the study with consequent suggestions for future research.

7. Workplan

PLAN OF WORK - MASTER THESIS - EUROPEAN MASTER IN BUSINESS STUDIES																
ACTIVITES	2020														2021	
	September		October				November				December				January	
	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	52	1	2
READING	Research literature															
	Reading literature															
METHODOLOGY	Theoretical framework															
	Interview design															
	Interview approval															
	Interviewing															
WRITING	Coding															
	Transcription															
	Analysis of results															
	Review															
	Presentation															
DEADLINES	Exposé															
	Delivery															
TIMELINE	ACTIVITIES	READING	METHODOLOGY				WRITING				DEADLINE					

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Annexes

ARTICLE TITLE	AUTHOR/S	YEAR	SOURCE	KEY CONCEPTS
Conceptualizing Adaptive Resilience using Grounded Theory	Venkataram Nilakant, Bernard Walker, Kate Van Heugten, Rosemary Baird, Herb De Vries	2014	New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations,	The paper conceptualizes the adaptive resilience as a complex dynamic that is constituted by a constellation of tangible and intangible resources, and then identify its core components using a grounded theory method.
Creating Resilient SMEs: Why One Size Might Not Fit All	Bridgette Sullivan-Taylor, Layla Branicki	2011	International Journal of Production Research	The papers gives insights about the link between flexibility and adaptation linked to the organizational size with a focus on SMEs.
Organizational resilience: a capability-based conceptualization	Stephanie Ducheck	2020	Business Research	The main finding of the paper states that resilience may be an important source of sustainable competitive advantage and should be developed deliberately.
Organizational Resilience: A Valuable Construct for Management Research?	Julia Hillmann, Edeltraud Guenther	2020	International Journal of Management Reviews,	It gives an overview of the main problems in conceptualization, it presents the methods that exist so far to measure resilience and suggest a new formative measurement for resilience.
Organizational Response To Adversity: Fusing Crisis Management And Resilience Research Streams	Trenton A. Williams, Daniel A. Gruber, KathleenM. Sutcliffe, Dean A. Shepherd, Eric Yanfei Zhao	2017	The Academy of Management Annals	The papers shows that some crisis are considered to be exceptional, but some other crisis are considered to be evolutionary for the organization and that crisis and resilience are strictly interlinked.
The Challenges of Routinizing for Building Resilient Startups	Alexander Haase, Peter Eberl	2019	Journal of Small Business Management	Routine results to be essential in start-ups and the best way to increase it results in incentives.
The Resilience Architecture Framework: Four organizational archetypes	Elena Alexandra Mamouni Limnios, Tim Mazzarol, Anas Ghadouani, Steven G.M. Schilizzi	2014	European Management Journal	Gives an overview of the Resilience architecture framework and the explanation of the four different dimensions of the model.
The Resilient Organization	Arjen Boin & Michel J. G. van Eeten	2013	Public Management Review	A well-structured safety process is not enough for resilience